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From the Baltimore Sun

Terrapin catch raises alarms

State considers ban on diamondback trapping as harvest leaps twentyfold

By Tom Pelton
Sun reporter

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Maryland is considering a ban on the capture of diamondback terrapin after watermen reported trapping more than 10,000 of the rare turtles last year - a twentyfold increase from the year before.

Demand for the state reptile is fueled by a growing appetite for Chesapeake terrapin soup in China, where many native turtles have been killed off.

Terrapin traps have proliferated despite regulations imposed by the Ehrlich administration last year that were advertised as an effort to save the turtle.

The regulatory effort "totally backfired," said Willem Roosenburg, a terrapin expert at Ohio University who advised Maryland on last year's rules. "I thought [the new regulations] would essentially close down the fishery."

The rules outlawed catching terrapin from November through July - but allowed the capture of smaller turtles, with shells from 4 to 7 inches long, from Aug. 1 through the end of October. Before last year, trapping turtles with shells smaller than 6 inches was prohibited.

Some watermen have said that the more liberal size limits encouraged more trapping and shipping of the small turtles to China. Faced with a booming market for terrapin in Asia, legislators and advocates in Maryland are urging the state to protect the reptile.

"Terrapin are a marvelous creature, and we certainly don't want to lose our state icon," said state Del. Virginia P. Clagett, an Anne Arundel County Democrat who has more than 30 co-sponsors on a bill to ban terrapin trapping. "We don't want to see the terrapin disappear, which is the way they are heading."

Terrapin are unique because they're the only turtle in the U.S. that can survive in the brackish mixture of salt and fresh water found in the [Chesapeake Bay](#). They're called "diamondback" because of the patterns on their shells, and they have been the mascot of the University of Maryland since 1932.

The [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#) is studying the possibility of a ban on terrapin trapping or tighter regulations, said Howard King, director of fisheries program at the agency.

"The information we received does compel us to further restrict the harvest of terrapin and do a better job of protecting terrapin nesting habitat," King said.

The construction of rock walls, roads and houses along beaches has destroyed terrapin nesting grounds, contributing to the decline of the species - perhaps more than trapping, King said.

Larry Simms, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said he believes that terrapin populations are healthy and outlawing trapping would eliminate an important source of income for watermen.

"Every time you take something away from a waterman, he's that much closer to starving to death," Simms said.

Maryland watermen reported trapping 10,278 of the reptiles last year - up from the 447 the previous year, 1,542 in 2004, 397 in 2003 and 124 in 2002, according to a new state report.

One reason the numbers spiked last year is because of better reporting required under the 2006 regulations, King said.

The estimates before last year might have significantly understated the terrapin harvest, King said. The state created a new license last year for diamondback trapping, and 34 watermen received the permits, according to state figures. Fewer than 10 watermen a year told the state they were fishing for terrapin before that. But more might have been catching the turtles and keeping it quiet, King said.

He said Gov. Martin O'Malley's administration plans to introduce new regulations this spring, after public hearings. "One option is an outright ban," King said. "Another option would be the status quo, and a third would be in the middle - a reduced harvest."

Sen. Roy P. Dyson, a Southern Maryland Democrat, is working with Clagett and other lawmakers on legislation that would outlaw commercial harvest of the terrapin. People would still be allowed to catch and keep up to three as pets, according to a draft of the bill. "The females produce very few eggs, and their mortality rate is very, very high," said Dyson. "We can't allow the kind of exploitation that's been going on."

Backing the legislators is a coalition of conservationists, including leaders of the [National Aquarium](#) in Baltimore.

"We can't have our state reptile and eat it, too - that's what it boils down to," said Jack Cover, general curator for the [National Aquarium](#).

Eleven states have outlawed the commercial harvest of the turtle, including Virginia, Delaware and Massachusetts, but not Maryland.

"It's very ironic," said Cover, who has been lobbying lawmakers this week in Annapolis to support the ban. "It's the mascot of the University of Maryland, and if we love our state mascot that much, we've got to make this decision."

Terrapin grow up to a foot in length, live up to a half-century and use their clawed feet to dig mollusks out of the mud.

The famously shy reptiles play an important role in preserving the bay's salt marshes and discouraging erosion. Terrapin eat snails, which eat spartina grass.

"If those populations of snails aren't kept down, the salt grasses will get eaten, and then the marshes will be washed away," said Richard B. Stanley, volunteer legal adviser for an advocacy group called the Chesapeake Terrapin Alliance.

Until the late 19th century, terrapin were regarded with disdain - fit only as food for servants.

Their image improved in the 1880s when a Crisfield businessman, Albert T. Lavallette Jr., started breeding them and marketing terrapin soup as a delicacy for upscale restaurants.

The turtles were regarded as a status symbol like caviar. They were fished almost to extinction around the turn of the century. But then the turtle soup, which was cooked with liberal amounts of sherry, went out of style in the 1930s with Prohibition.

Demand for the turtles was low until the late 1990s, when Asian consumers began seeking terrapin (which are native to America) for soup as their own turtles disappeared, said Marguerite Whilden, co-director of the nonprofit Terrapin Institute.

Nobody knows how many terrapin are left, but many experts suspect their numbers are falling as the bay's beaches are devoured by development, said Whilden.

One study, by Ohio's Roosenburg, found that the population of adult female terrapin in a section of the Patuxent River dropped from about 1,000 in 1996 to fewer than 300 in 2005.

"We don't want them to become threatened or endangered," said Whilden. "Because if you get to that point, you've lost the battle."

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tom.pelton@baltsun.com
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